



*Soapstone UMC*  
*written by Gretchen Shea*

# Looking for God Along the Way?

**Pause:** Where is your favorite place to visit? What is the journey like when you travel to that place? What do you do when you get there? How do you encounter God in that place?

**Listen:** Genesis 12:1-9, Luke 2:41-51

**Reflect:** In our scripture readings today, we encounter two very different stories. In the first story, God talks with Abram and tells him to go to the land that God has provided. Abram is to take his family, his animals, all that he owns, and travel to this new place. Abram is to leave behind the security of all he has known to settle in this new land that God will provide for him. Abram trusts God and does as God asks of him. God travels with Abram and prepares the way for him.

In the second scripture reading we find the boy Jesus, the one story in the Bible that gives us insight into Jesus as a child. The story begins with Jesus and his family going to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. They are on a Pilgrimage to encounter God and to spend time praising and worshiping God in the temple. Departing Jerusalem, the family doesn't realize Jesus isn't with them. They begin to look for him but can't find Jesus among the travelers; they return to Jerusalem and find him in the temple. When Mary and Joseph ask why he is still there, Jesus tells them that he needs to be in his Father's house. In other words, Jesus wanted to be near God.

Where do you feel closest to God? Do you ever feel or hear God calling you to a place to be closer to him?

Many of us haven't traveled for some time now. This summer you may be taking your first vacation in over a year. Are you excited? Where are you going? How can God be a part of this journey? God may be calling you to recognize the love of Christ in someone you meet on the street. God may be nudging you to serve others while you travel. God may be inviting you to sit in the quiet of the woods or along the seashore to take in the beauty of the world God created.

Look for God while you travel.

Maybe you aren't ready to travel yet so you will have a staycation again this summer. What will you do with your time? How might you connect with God around your house, your neighborhood, your town?

Maybe like Jesus, you are drawn to be in the Father's house. A church member told me recently that on their first day back in the sanctuary, "It felt like home." I am positive God loves that statement. Sometimes a journey of faith takes us back to where we've always been, but God meets us there with a fresh perspective or new understanding of the Gospel. How might you encounter God in the old familiar places of your faith?

**Pray:** Spirit of the Living God, go with us this week wherever we go for vacation. Prepare a place for us where we can encounter you in mighty ways. Help us to see you in the face of others and to hear you in the song of birds. Open our ears, our eyes, our minds, and our hearts so we might find you along the way. Amen

**Go:** Look for God as you travel, near or far. Listen for how God is calling you to recognize the presence of the Spirit and to offer the light of Christ to others.

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# Connecting to God with Our Senses

**Pause:** Close your eyes. What do you hear around you? What do you smell? Wait for a brief time and then open your eyes again. Focus on something in front of you. What do you see? Is it the thing you heard or smelled? Now get up and touch it. How does it feel? What would you tell someone about this experience?

**Listen:** 1 John 1:1-4

**Reflect:** I love the sounds of animals and birds, of the wind in the trees, and of the ocean waves breaking on the sand. I love the smell of coffee brewing and of cookies and pies baking. I love the taste of good food. I love to watch my granddaughters play. I love to see smiles appear on the faces of others. I love the feel of a soft blanket, the touch of my husband's hand in mine, and the kiss of a gentle breeze upon my cheek.

I sense God in all these wonderful things. Each comes to me as a gift; a reminder of the many ways God expresses love to me.

In the scripture for today, the author of 1 John shares that he and his readers are witnesses to the life of Christ. They are in fellowship with the Father and the Son, because of what they have seen and heard. They have experienced God's love through their senses. The author goes on to say that "we declare to you...". So, the believers don't stop with simply engaging in God's world and God's story. They tell others about what they have experienced.

Our senses are often the way we connect to the ordinary, everyday things in our lives.

But how do our senses help us engage with our faith? For me, as I encounter the world around me, I encounter God. As I touch, see, smell, taste, and hear things, I interact with the God who created them and me. I become more aware of the presence and love of God. And I can't help but share what I learn and how I feel. I can't help but tell others when I experience God doing something awesome, even if it is as small as a butterfly taking flight for the first time.

While you are on vacation this week, use your senses to connect with God. Notice the things around you that bring God to mind. Be thankful for the gifts that each of your senses offers you throughout the day.

**Pray:** God of all creation, thank you for blessing us with our senses. Thank you for giving us the ability to engage in the world around us through sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing. Help us to find you in the ordinary things around us, in the little miracles that happen each day. While on vacation Lord, help us to experience you in new and different ways. Amen

**Go:** Seek God throughout the day. Make a note at the end of the day of how you experienced God through one of your senses. At the end of the week, tell someone else about your experience.

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# Gifted to Serve the World

**Pause:** What unique gifts has God given you? How might you use them to serve God's world? What does it look like when you share your gifts with others? Can you make a bigger impact for God's Kingdom by working and serving with others?

**Listen:** Romans 12:1-8

**Reflect:** John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, is credited with having three rules. The first two are most often seen as "Do no harm" and "Do good". The third one can be found in different forms. My favorite is "Stay in love with God", but you may also read it as "Do good of every possible sort" or "Attend to the ordinances of God". No matter how I read it, I have come to understand this statement to mean that I should do what I can to learn about God, grow in my faith, and live out my faith by serving others.

God created each of us with gifts that are to be used to build up the body of Christ. As I grow in my faith and learn more about my gifts, I can serve the church more completely. Serving from my gifts brings me joy and creates an energy that sustains my service.

Working with Lay Leadership and the Missions Committee over the last few years, I have had many opportunities to help people find ways to serve. It is such a pleasure to help someone figure out what spiritual gifts they can offer the church and then help them find ways to plug-in and use those gifts to further the mission of God's church.

The mission of the United Methodist Church is "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." We are all a part of that mission. It isn't always easy. It can be quite messy at times. The body of Christ is a family and families can be messy. But when we work together, when we bring the gifts God has given us, and follow in the footsteps of Jesus, we answer God's call to serve the world.

- Do you know what gifts you have to offer the church?
- How might you use your gifts to help Soapstone make an impact in the world?
- How might you use your gifts to serve God and to share God's message with others?
- How might you use the gifts God has given you to bless others this week while you are on vacation?

**Pray:** God, thank you for the spiritual gifts you have given us. Thank you for calling us to be a part of the body of Christ. Thank you for welcoming us into the family and for giving us ways to share your love with others. Amen

**Go:** Think about the spiritual gifts God has given you. Find a way to use one of those gifts to serve God and God's family today.

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# A House for God

**Pause:** What is your first memory of being in a church? What stands out to you about that memory? I have many memories of the churches I attended growing up. Although I can still picture some of the buildings or grounds, what I remember most are the people. Since they were all United Methodist Churches, I also remember how my faith was formed in those places and by those people.

**Listen:** 1 Kings 8:14-21

**Reflect:** For many generations, the people of God believed God traveled with them through the Arc of the Covenant. God would go before them or behind them. God would meet their leaders on the mountain top. God would reside behind the curtain in the tent set up for worship. In today's scripture reading, Solomon recognizes that King David had wanted to build a permanent structure where God could live and be present with the people. God told David that Solomon would be the one to build the temple, not David. The temple is now complete, and King Solomon is celebrating. This temple will be a place where all of Israel can come together to worship the Living God.

In 1907 the foundation stone was laid in place for the National Cathedral in Washington DC. The Cathedral had been the vision of Major L'Enfant whom President Washington commissioned to create a plan for the United States capital city in 1791. The National Cathedral was to be a place of prayer for the nation. The National Cathedral is alive and thriving today. From a museum to holding weekly worship, many people cross the threshold of the space. A number of presidents have attended a National Day of Prayer in their honor following their inauguration. It is a place where people gather to worship the Living God.

For thousands of years, people have been drawn to dedicated places where they can worship God with other people. God places the desire within our hearts to be present to our Creator and to others. Gathering with the Body of Christ is who we are Christians. Doing so in a building set aside for the very purpose of worshipping God, doesn't contain us, it sustains us and moves us forward to spread the Gospel outside the walls.

What does church mean to you? What does the church building mean to you? How do you worship God within the walls of the church? With the Community of faith?

**Pray:** Thank you, God, for welcoming us into the Body of Christ and for leading us to our church home. Help us to be sustained by what we learn within the walls and by the people with whom we worship. Help us go forth to spread the Good News and serve the world. Amen

**Go:** While you are on vacation, find a church in the area and learn something about it. What is something you find interesting about this church?

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# The Amazing Gift of Love

**Pause:** I remember growing up hearing the “Love” chapter, as it was often referred to, at weddings. In high school I received a gift, a sign with 1 Corinthians 13: 4-8a printed on it. I knew chapter 13 was about more than just romantic love, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on what it was really all about, until...

**Listen:** 1 Corinthians 13:1-2, 8-13

**Reflect:** It was in college before I heard someone say, “You shouldn’t read chapter 13 without reading chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians. The two are meant to go together.” I admit it took me a while to understand that. I’m not sure when I finally figured out that Chapter 12 tells us about spiritual gifts and being a part of the body of Christ and Chapter 13 tells us that by loving others, we act as the body of Christ.

In the Wesley Study Bible, the footnote for Chapter 13:1-13 reads, “This beloved chapter is integral to 12:1-14:40, for it outlines the ‘more excellent way’ (12:31) by expounding the priority of love above all spiritual gifts. Love is necessary to the Christian life (see 8:1-3); whereas eloquent speech, prophetic power, faith, philanthropy, and even martyrdom – without love – are nothing.” Love stands out. Love is a gift from God and a gift we can offer others. Love can and should guide our hearts as Christians.

This past year was tough. It was tough on individuals. It was tough on families. It was tough on communities.

My family experienced a lot of challenges throughout the pandemic. We had more than a few uncertainties come our way. I was often left questioning how I would make it through some of the challenges. For me, the love of God was what got me through. When I doubted myself, my abilities, my worth, or my service to God and the church, God’s love was the sustaining factor that held me together. God’s love was always there. Arms wide-open, God was always waiting to hold and comfort me, to welcome me fully into an embrace that would never let me go.

Sometimes I experienced God’s gracious love through the kindness of a friend or a word of reassurance from a co-worker or family member. Sometimes God would meet me on my back porch in the greeting of a hummingbird or the silent flight of an owl. At other times, I would sense God’s presence in the room as a warmth settled in around me. God was there, in my tears, my prayers, my songs of lament and joy, and my shouts of praise. God’s love never failed!

Where did you experience God’s sustaining love in the past year?

Did you have an opportunity to share God’s love with someone else who needed it?

How might you share God’s love with someone today?

**Pray:** God of all good gifts, thank you for the gift of love. Thank you for the many ways you pour out your love on us. Guide us as we show others the love you so freely give. Amen

**Go:** While on vacation this week, be on the lookout for ways God can use you to share the amazing gift of love with someone else.

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## How Do You Encourage Peace?

**Pause:** I crave peace! This past year has been difficult. So many areas of the world are experiencing conflict, from civil war to mass shootings, it seems no place offers peace. I want to live in a peaceful world. I want to be in relationships not marked by strife and tension, but rather by unity, hope, and joy. Don't you?

**Listen:** Deuteronomy 20:19-20, Ephesians 4:1-6

**Reflect:** When you hear the word peace, what is the first thing that comes to mind? For me it is trying to help my sons, when they were little, and now my granddaughters, settle sibling arguments. Oh, I know that isn't the same as peace between nations, but sometimes peace starts in the home. At least, it does for me. I want a peaceful environment in which to live. If there is peace in my home, I can carry that feeling into other relationships and circumstances. But more than the peace I find in my home, I find I am centered by the peace God offers. That is a peace that never leaves me no matter what is happening in the world.

In the first scripture reading for today, the people of Israel are given instructions on how to treat the land they have conquered, even in times of war they must not cut down the fruit-bearing trees. In the second reading, Paul is telling the church at Ephesus that they are called to be one body, unified in Christ. I love the first three verses read from the New Revised Standard Version, "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." The people were called to look for ways to live in peace and to encourage peaceful actions.

Pastor Mitzi's sermon on July 11 references the Tent of Nations. I was unfamiliar with the Tent of Nations, so I looked it up. The Tent of Nations is an educational and environmental farm where people from around the world can gather to learn about building bridges with each other and the land. I love that idea! This farm has been in existence for 105 years, offering a ministry of faith, love, and hope. Sounds like my kind of place. Seriously, I'd love to take a pilgrimage there to learn more about what they do. A place where peace is a priority! So why bridge building in this area? This area has experienced the long-standing conflict between Palestine and Israel; a place where conflict has lasted for centuries.

You may be asking, "How can we offer hope and peace to that area?"

Short of visiting the Tent of Nations and volunteering with them, I don't know how I can be a change agent in this area. But I know I can offer peace and hope in my small corner of the world. After all, I must start somewhere. I must start now. I can be a bridge builder – with friends, neighbors, co-workers, and family. I can share a peaceful spirit in meetings and gatherings to which I attend. I can speak with love to those with whom I disagree. I can work to bring unity to the Body of Christ wherever I go.

**Pray:** God, we thank you for the example of love your Son, Jesus taught us. We thank you for the unity the Spirit offers. We thank you for the abiding presence you give us. May you lead us to the places where we can share your peace with others. Amen

**Go:** This week, look for opportunities where you can be a harbinger of peace. Share the peace of God with everyone you meet.

